

The Immediate Knowledge of God

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"For some have not the knowledge of
God."—1 Cor. 15:34.

WHO then are these Corinthian disciples, that they have not so much as the knowledge of God? Plainly enough our apostle is not charging them here with ignorance, but with some lack of the divine illumination which ought, if they are true disciples, to be in them. They certainly know God in the traditional and merely cognitive way. Indeed the apostle is discoursing to them here of the resurrection of the dead, which is itself a matter based in Christian ideas. Besides, he adds, "I speak this to your shame;" having it in view that they are not

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Pagans, but so far informed, as disciples, that they ought to know God in a way more interior.

We shall best understand the point assumed in this impeachment, I think, if we raise the distinction between knowing God, and knowing about God. Doubtless, it is much to know about God, about his operations, his works, his plans, his laws, his truth, his perfect attributes, his saving mercies. This kind of knowledge is presupposed in all faith, and constitutes the rational ground of faith, and
115 so far is necessary even to salvation. But true faith itself discovers another and more absolute kind of knowledge, a knowledge of God himself; immediate, personal knowledge, coming out of no report, or statement, or any thing called truth, as being taught in language. It is knowing God within, even as we know ourselves. The other is only a knowing about God, as from a distance. To put this matter of the immediate knowledge of God in its true doctrinal position, it may be well to say, that we have two denials set against it, both as nearly fatal as need be to any such possibility.¹ One is the denial of the philosophers outside of Christianity, speculating there about the cognitive functions, and making what they conceive to be their specially profound discovery, that knowledges are possible only of things relative. Therefore, God being infinite, can not be known—God is unknowable. They say nothing of faith, they have no conception of any

¹Y.C.C.

such super-eminent, almost divine talent in our humanity, shut up or drawn away from God by our sin—an immediate sensing power, to which God may be as truly known, as we know the distinct existence of objects perceived by the eyes. Could they simply trust themselves over to God, to live by his tender guidance and true inward revelation, they would never again call him the unknowable. Meantime, there will be many children of sorrow, unlearned and simple, who will easily know the God they have it as their point of philosophy to show can not any way be known! This most false and feeble doctrine of negation, I do not feel called upon to discuss—it will die of inanity sooner than it can by argument.

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The other and second form of denial as regards the immediate knowledge of God, sets up its flag inside of the Christian church and among the muniments of doctrine. Here the possibility of faith is admitted, and the necessity of it abundantly magnified. But the faith power is used up, it is conceived, on propositions; that is propositions which affirm something about God. It does not go through, and over, and beyond, such propositions, to meet the inward revelation or discovery of God himself. The accepted doctrine is that we know, or can know God, only so far as we know something about him, no immediate knowledge of him being at all possible, or even conceivable. The continually reiterated assumption is that never, in our most sacred, dearest, deepest moments of holy experience,

do we get beyond being simply acted on by certain truths we know about God. And when men are called to God, saying, "Come unto me," they understand the meaning to be, that they are called only to believe something about him put in words, and work their feeling or their faith by what the words supply. They do not even conceive it as a possibility, that we should know God himself as a presence operative in us; even as we know the summer heat by its pervasive action in our bodies. We do not know the heat by report, or debate, or inference, or scientific truth interpreting medially between us and it; we do not see it, or hear it, or handle it, and yet we have it and know that we have, by the inward sense it creates. So in what is called the Christian regeneration, our being born of God implies the immediate revelation of God within—all which these teachers can not so understand, but imagine that we are born of something about God rather; that is of truths, affirmations, notions, working medially or instrumentally between us and God.

What then is the truth in this matter? Why it is that human souls, or minds are just as truly made to be filled with God's internal actuating presence, as human bodies are to be tempered internally by heat, or as matter is made to be swayed by gravity, or the sky-space to be irradiated by the day. God is to them heat, gravity, day, immediately felt as such, and known by the self-revelation of his person. So at least it was originally to be, and so it would be now, had not this presence of God internally

and personally to souls, this quickening, life-giving God-sense, been shut off by sin. For by this they tear themselves away from God, and become self-centered, separated creatures, even as growths in a cavern, or as fishes on the land, having no longer that immediate knowledge of God which is their normal state of subsistence. Henceforth they know or may know, much about God, but they do not know God. They are shut up as to God, dark to God, except, as by the head, they may think, discover, learn, or reason something about him. Never do they know him till he becomes centered in their soul again as its life, and the crowning good and blessing of its eternity. And this is fitly called being born of God, because it is the entering of God again into his place—to be the beginning there of a new movement and life derivative from him, and fed by the springs of his fullness in the heart. Which entering in of God supposes, in fact, a new discovery of God. Not that the subject is put back now into a new cognitive relation; his cognitive function is no-wise altered, and if there were no other, would still be as blind to God as before. The new discovery made is made by faith, opening the heart to receive, and in receiving feel or inwardly sense, what should have been the original and always normal revelation.

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Is it then to be said or imagined that, in this new birth, or new-begun life of faith, the subject really knows God by an immediate knowledge? He may not so conceive it, I answer, but it is none the less true. He will speak, it may be, only of his peace, but

it will seem to him to be a kind of divine peace. He will testify that God is wondrously near to him, and he will put into that word *near* something like a sense of Him. He will be conscious and will say that he is, of a strangely luminous condition, as if his whole body, in the words of Christ, were full of light; and all the scripture terms that set forth God as a light, and a sun, and a power opposite to darkness, will come in, as it were, to answer, and to interpret the force of his experience. Still he will not conceive, it may be, of any such thing as that the peace, the nearness, the luminousness of his soul, supposes an immediate knowledge of God now discovered to him. He may even disown such a conception, as implying a kind of irreverence. Nevertheless that is the exact verdict of his experience, and nothing else can at all give the meaning of it. Indeed, if we can believe it, he was made originally to be even conscious of God and live eternally in that kind of immediate knowledge; which design is now beginning, for the first time, to be fulfilled.

Thus you have every one two kinds of knowledge relating to yourself. One is what you know mediately about yourself, through language, and one that which you have immediately as being conscious of yourself. Under the first you learn who your parents were, what others think of you, what effects the world has on you, what power you have over it, and what is thought to be the science, it may be, of your nature, as an intelligent being. Under the second you have a knowledge of yourself so immediate,

that there is no language in it, no thought, no act of judgment or opinion, you simply have a *self-feeling* that is intuitive and direct. Now you were made to have just such an immediate knowledge of God as of yourself; to be conscious of God; only this consciousness of God has been closed up by your sin and is now set open by your faith; and this exactly is what distinguishes every soul enlightened by the Spirit, and born of God. Whether he says it or not, this is the real account of his experience, that God is now revealed in him, and that he begins to be conscious of God; for it is a fact, as every soul thus enlightened will testify, that he is now conscious, not of himself only, but of a certain *otherness* moving in him; some mysterious power of good that is to him what he is not to himself, a spring of new-born impulse, a living of new life. It is not that he sees God without by the eye, any more than that he sees himself without by the eye, when he is conscious of himself; it is not that he has any mind-view of God awakened in him any more than that he has in consciousness a mind-view of himself. It is only that he has the sense of a sublime *other* not himself; a power, a life, a transcendently great, felt Other—who is really and truly God. Hence the rest, and strength, and peace, and luminous glory into which he is born—it is nothing but the revelation of God and the immediate knowledge of God. Probably enough he will not say this, not having been trained or accustomed to this mode of conceiving the change, but he will say that God is *near*, wonderfully, gloriously near, and will press

into the word all nearness possible, even such as to include in fact the felt consciousness of God, and the immediate knowledge of his presence.

121 Observe now in what manner the Scriptures speak on this subject. And the time would fail me to merely recount the ways in which it is given as the distinction of faith or holy experience, that it carries, in some way, the knowledge of God; and differs the subject in that manner from all that are under the blindness of mere nature.

Discoursing thus, for example, of the state of love, it distinguishes that state as being one, in which God and God's love are actually revealed in the soul—"For love is of God, and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love." And accordingly there was never a soul on earth that being born into the great principle and impulse of self-sacrificing love, did not have the sense of God in it, and consciously live, in some mysterious participation of him.

The Holy Spirit, in like manner, is spoken of in a great many ways, as the intercouring life and immediate inward manifestation of God. Thus he is said to "witness with our spirit," which means that there is to be a consciousness raised of his presence in the soul, and a sense of reciprocity established by what is called his witnessing with us; as if he carried himself into our feeling in a way of internal dialogue. So there is a discerning of the Spirit spoken of, which does not mean a reasoning out, but an imme-

mediate knowing of the mind of the Spirit. Christ also declares when promising the Spirit, that the world seeth him not, neither knoweth him, but ye *know* him, for he dwelleth with you and shall be in you. And in immediate connection—"the world seeth me no more, but ye see me—[know me, that is, in him.] At that day ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in me and I in you." And then again—"He that loveth me shall be loved of my father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him." And what is manifestation but immediate knowledge?

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This new consciousness of God is plainly declared by the apostle when he says—"That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge; that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God." What language but this, "to know the love that passeth knowledge," to have revealed in conscious participation what can not be known or measured by the notions of the cognitive understanding—what but this can fitly express the sacred visitation of a Christian soul, when through Christ and the Spirit it is wakened again to the eternal consciousness of God.

O this wonder of discovery, the knowledge of God—who can find words for it, or the change it must needs make! It even makes the soul another creature to itself. Now it is no more blank to God, tortures itself no more in guesses dim, sighs no

more—"O that I knew where I might find him." It has recovered, as it were, the major part of existence that before was lost; it knows not only itself, but it has the knowledge of God; and in that fact it is raised out of its mere finite speck of magnitude, into the conscious participation of being infinite.

123 Every thing is now become luminous. Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new—great as new, and holy as great, and blessed as holy.

But there is an objection to this mode of conceiving holy experience, as implying an immediate discovery of God, which I am properly required to notice. What is the use, in this view, some will ask, of a Bible, or external revelation? what use of the incarnation itself? Are not these advances on our outward knowledge superseded and made useless, when we conceive that God is offered to immediate knowledge or experience? In one view they are, and in another they are not. Does it follow that because we have an immediate knowledge of heat, we have therefore no use at all for the scientific doctrine of heat, or the laws by which it is expounded? Suppose it is a part of our interest in this article of heat, that we be able to generate more of it, or use it differently and with better economy. So far we have a use in knowing about heat, as well as knowing heat. In the same way it is of immense consequence to know every thing possible about God, that we may find how the more perfectly to know God. We want, in this manner, the whole Scripture; and not least the

incarnation and the cross, and the story of the pentecost. These things are matters given to us about God, for the very purpose of showing us how to find God. The inherent use of all medial knowledges, all truths, cognitions, books, appearances, and teachings, is that they bring us in, to know God by an immediate knowledge. So far I would give most ready assent to the Quaker doctrine. We are never to put the book between us and God, to give us second-hand knowledges of him, and there accept our limit. The book is given us to carry us beyond the book, and put us in the way of finding God as others have found him; then and there to be in the Spirit as they were, and know Him by such private interpretation as he will give us. The mine is given, not that we may have the gold already dug, but that we may go a mining for ourselves. And as these great saints of holy scripture were men of like passions with us, it is to be our glorious privilege that they pilot us on, by telling us how to know and grow as they did.

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There is also another objection to be noticed here, which moves in the exactly opposite direction, where those who know not God complain that revelation, as they look upon it, does not reveal him, and that God is dark to them still, as they could not expect him to be. If there be a God, they ask, why does he not stand forth and be known as a Father to his children? Why allow us to grope, and stumble after him, or finally miss him altogether? They are not satisfied with the Bible, and if we call it a revelation of God, they do not see it. Why should

125 he be so difficult of discovery, hid in recesses so deep, and only doubtfully and dimly known? If there be a God, is he not of such consequence, that being hid is even a wrong? Is it not also the right most plainly of every human creature, to have an easy and free knowledge of him? I certainly think it is; only we must not make him responsible for the blear and self-blinding of our sin. And if it were not for this, I think we should all see him plainly enough, and always, and every where. For it is the whole endeavor of his management to be known. He not only meets our understanding processes in the facts of his Bible, but he offers himself to be known without any process at all, just as the light is; nay, if we will have it so, to be a kind of second consciousness in us, and be known to us even as we know ourselves. He is even pressing himself into knowledge when our eyes are shut—in our self-will, our hate, our denial, our desolation. O that for one hour you could have the ingenuous mind that is needed to really give him welcome! No more, after that, would you complain of him that he withdraws from your knowledge.

Now this exposition of God's truth, here brought to a close, converges practically, as I conceive, on a single point of broadest consequence; correcting a mistake almost universally prevalent in some greater or less degree; the mistake I mean of being overmuch occupied in religion with matters of the head. The true evidence of discipleship is knowing God. Other men know something about him. The

Christian knows him, has him as a friend. And there is no substitute for this. Observances, beliefs, opinions, self-testing severities—all these are idle and prove nothing. If a man knows God, it is a fact so grand, so full of meaning, that he wants no evidence beside. All curious explorations and deep searches in this matter are very much as if a man were trying himself carefully, to find whether he sees the day. If a man knows God in the revelation of his Son, he is *ipso facto* full, and wants no more. Therefore he should not even begin to be elaborate in his self-testings, or his questions about himself; the sign is a bad one. When the true day hath dawned, and the day-star hath risen in the heart, the man himself ought to know it without much trouble. Let thine eye be single, serve God, seek God, know God only, and thy whole body shall be full of light. 126

Now as these keep off the light of their day, by the ever-busy meddling of their understanding, there is another class who have never found the day by reason of their over-busy, over-curious endeavors to make ready for it. They are waiting, and reading, and reasoning, as they think, to get light *for* conversion. They are going to be converted rationally, nursing all the while a subtle pride of this, which only makes them darker, and puts them farther off. They quite misconceive the relation of our previous opinions, knowledges, and wisdoms, to the state of faith or conversion; and putting themselves down upon these, they are all the while at work, as they think, grading a road into the

kingdom of God, so that when the road is done, they expect to be steered straight in, guided by, and rested on, the rails they have now finally laid down.

127 But there is, alas! a great gulf of transition here to be passed, that forbids eternally any such conceit as that. There is no such relation between the knowing about God and knowing God, as they think there is. All the speculative preparations made, and roads of knowledge graded, stop inevitably short of the kingdom, and whoever imagines that he is going to be trundled logically along the plane of his notional wisdoms and arguments, into God's bosom, will assuredly find that he is not there, but has fallen infinitely short of it. What then, must you drop out your very intelligence in order to become a Christian? Far from that as possible; you are only required to use your intelligence intelligently. That is, perceiving that all you know, debate and think *about* God is, at best, only introductory to the knowledge of God himself, and some way off, take care rather to let go your speculations and open your heart in faith to the true manifestation of God. After all you have reasoned, faith is still to come. The roads of the natural understanding are in a lower plane, you must rise, you must go up into trust and know *God—God himself*—by the inward discovery of his infinite spirit and person.

What is wanted, therefore, for us all, is summed up in this Christian word faith—faith in Christ, or faith in God; for it makes no difference. Thinking and questioning stir the mind about God, faith dis-

cerns him, and by it, as the soul's open window, he enters to be discerned. Would that all of you could know how much this means. Cease then from your questions, all ye that are afar off, not knowing God, and asking sometimes, with a sigh, where shall we find him? Know that he is here in thy mouth and in thy heart; only believe in him, and you shall know the greatest bliss a soul can know, the Father of all glory, manifest within. 128